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When 'Places' Include Pets: Broadening the Scope of Relational Approaches to Promoting Aging-in-Place

Cover Page Footnote

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When 'Places' Include Pets: Broadening the Scope of Relational Approaches to Promoting Aging-In-Place

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Aging-in-place is a well-established concept, but discussions rarely consider that many older adults live with pets. In a 'pet-friendly' city, we conducted semi-structured interviews to explore perspectives of community-based social support agencies that promote aging-in-place, and those of animal welfare agencies. Applying a relational ecology theoretical framework, we found that pets may contribute to feeling socially-situated, yet may also exacerbate constraints on autonomy experienced by some older adults. Pet-related considerations at times led to discretionary acts of more-than-human solidarity, but also created paradoxical situations for service-providers, impacting their efforts to assist older adults. A shortage of pet-friendly affordable housing emerged as an overarching challenge. Coordination among social support and animal welfare agencies, alongside pet-supportive housing policies, will strengthen efforts to promote aging-in-place in ways that are equitable and inclusive.

Key words: companion animals, older adults, aging-in-place, community services, affordable housing

With population aging now well underway, we have witnessed global efforts to initiate coordinated, cross-sectoral strategies to support older adults in ways that promote independence and social inclusion (Steels, 2015). In particular, there are growing efforts underway to promote 'aging-in-place,' a policy orientation that has the goal of enabling older adults to live independently and to lead meaningful lives while remaining in their homes and neighbourhoods for as long as possible (Meneec, Means, Keating, Parkhurst, & Eales, 2011; Stewart, Crockett, Gritton, Stubbs, & Pascoe, 2014). This strategy is also well-aligned with the preferences of older adults themselves (Gitlin, 2003; Stewart et al., 2014; Wiles et al., 2009; Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve, & Allen, 2011).

Promoting independence and social inclusion via aging-in-place hinges upon efforts to support the physical, emotional and social well-being of older adults (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). To date, the aging-in-place literature has viewed this endeavour through an anthropocentric lens, positioning aging-in-place as an exclusively human activity. Yet, in most Western countries, between a quarter and a third of older adults, defined as those at or above 65 years old, live in the company of a pet (Himsworth & Rock, 2013; McNicholas, 2014; Peak, Ascione, & Doney, 2012), and pet-ownership is also on the rise in Japan and China (Hansen, 2013; Headley, Na, & Zheng, 2007). Even so, few aging-in-place strategies acknowledge the likelihood that a pet will be present in many older adults' lives. Similarly, consideration of relationships between older adults and pets are missing from prevalent understandings of qualities of physical and social environments needed to create equitable opportunities to age-in-place.

The potential of pets to contribute to older adults' aging-in-place experiences is far-reaching and holistic. Older adults, especially those who live alone, are likely to spend substantial amounts of time with their pets, upwards of 80% of their day (McNicholas, 2014). Such companionship positions these relationships to be key sources of well-being for many older adults (Enders-Slegers, 2000; Knight & Edwards, 2008; Lago, McConnell, & Knight, 1983; Mahalski, Jones, & Maxwell, 1988; Raina, Waltner-Toews, Bonnett, Woodward, & Abernathy, 1999; Wilson & Netting, 1987). The companionship of a pet may also help offset the negative mental health impacts of loneliness and grief

experienced later in life (Garritty, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989; Knight & Edwards, 2008; Krause-Parello, 2012; Mahalski et al., 1988; Stanley, Conwell, Bowen, & Van Orden, 2013; Wells & Rodi, 2000), although pet loss may also become a substantial source of grief for some (Adams, Bonnett, & Meek, 2000; McCracken, 1987; Morley & Fook, 2005). Beyond companionship, having a pet may also help to support physical function as people age (Branson, Boss, Cron, & Kang, 2016; Curl, Bibbo, & Johnson, 2016; Raina et al., 1999; Thorpe et al., 2006). Together, these factors may contribute to maintaining independence throughout old age, a desired outcome that drives aging-in-place initiatives (Menec et al., 2011; Steels, 2015; World Health Organization, 2012).

At the same time, older adults' relationships with pets may also challenge our idealized conceptions of aging-in-place. Older adults may, for instance, ignore their own health issues in order to accommodate a pet's needs, particularly to avoid being parted from their pets (McNicholas, 2014; Wells & Rodi, 2000). Older adults may also divert scarce financial resources to meet their pet's needs alongside, or even before, their own. Indeed, this situation prompted the Meals on Wheels Association of America to initiate pet-meal programs in several communities (Huss, 2013). Older adults may also delay transitioning into appropriate housing situations if they are not allowed to remain with their pets (McNicholas, 2014; Morley & Fook, 2005; Ormerod, 2012; Shore, Petersen, & Douglas, 2003).

While housing supply is a key and pressing priority for aging-in-place (Menec et al., 2011; Steels, 2015; Stewart et al., 2014), there is a shortage of both private and subsidized rental housing that is both affordable and pet-friendly (Huss, 2005, 2013; Ormerod, 2012; Power, 2016). This situation is particularly concerning if we consider that older adults living in vulnerable circumstances (e.g., having lower incomes and facing increasing social isolation) may also benefit the most from the companionship of a pet (Anderson, Lord, Hill, & McCune, 2015; Lago et al., 1983; Mahalski et al., 1988; Morley & Fook, 2005; Ormerod, 2012; Smith, Seibert, Jackson, & Snell, 1992; Wilson & Netting, 1987). Furthermore, denying older adults the *choice* to age-in-place with pets may also impede efforts to promote social inclusion and autonomy, desired goals of formal efforts to promote aging-

in-place (Menec et al., 2011; Steels, 2015; World Health Organization, 2012).

Importantly, our inattention to pets' contributions to aging-in-place experiences has troubling consequences for the animals themselves. Pet-prohibitive housing policies constitute one of the main reasons why pets are relinquished to shelters (Coe et al., 2014; Shore et al., 2003). Arguments used to defend pet-prohibitive rental policies, including concerns around older adults' abilities to care for their pets, may be unfounded (Huss, 2013; Mahalski et al., 1988; McNicholas, 2014). Even in the U.S., where responsible pet ownership is considered a civil right (Huss, 2013), there are few statutory provisions that ensure that older adults who rent homes can keep a pet (Huss, 2005, 2013).

To our knowledge, only one municipal aging-in-place initiative, "GenPhilly," has formally identified pets as a priority within its government-sanctioned, multi-sectoral efforts to sustainably support aging-in-place (Clark, 2014). Thus far, this initiative has generated a comprehensive online resource that connects older adults with pet-related information and services, in addition to raising broader awareness of the need to support older adults and their pets (Clark, 2014). To date, it appears that no resources have been directed towards offsetting systemic challenges like pet-friendly housing supply, although valuable efforts along these lines continue to progress (Hoffman & Clark, 2012).

As researchers whose interests span gerontology, social work, and veterinary medicine, we are concerned with the prevailing anthropocentric conception of aging-in-place. Few studies have paid explicit attention to ways that human-animal relationships are influenced by the physical and social environments that ultimately enable or constrain aging-in-place experiences. Nor do we understand how the reluctance to formally position pets as a potential source of health and well-being—or conversely, as a source of anxiety and concern—may also be impacting the effectiveness of our organized efforts to promote independence and social inclusion via aging-in-place.

Agencies that provide support services designed to assist vulnerable older adults to age-in-place may offer invaluable, experientially-informed insights into ways that relationships with pets may shape clients' lives, yet these perspectives are rarely considered within the literature on aging and pets. Similarly,

little attention has been paid to ways that population aging may be affecting animal welfare agencies, whether through rates of surrenders, the condition of animals being received, difficulties with rehoming older pets, or other types of challenges. Our study was designed to shed light upon these gaps in understanding by garnering the perspectives of community agency employees and volunteers who work directly with older adults, either through human social support services or through animal welfare programs. In particular, we explored perspectives on roles that pets play in relation to older adults' aging-in-place experiences and ways that pet-related considerations may shape their own efforts to assist older adults.

In approaching this study, we applied a relational ecology theoretical framework (Putney, 2013) to build our understanding of human-animal relationships as both influencing and being influenced by experiences of aging-in-place. This novel framework highlights ways that relational contexts shape human-animal bonds and contribute to psychological well-being amongst older people. Putney's framework interweaves concepts derived from developmental theory, relational theory, anthropology, and ecology in order to highlight contextually-contingent interdependencies between people and pets. More specifically, Putney's (2013) relational ecology theory is built upon five overarching theoretical premises, that human-animal relationships may: (1) enable older adults to adapt to aging through a continual evolution of self-identity via productive activity and experiences of both dependence and independence; (2) influence other definitions of self, including self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-acceptance; (3) assist with developing and maintaining feelings of stability, security, and safety, in addition to those of self; (4) provide continuity throughout transitions that occur with increasing frequency later in life; and (5) mirror ecological inter-dependencies that manifest in both similarities and differences, but without devaluation of things that are considered to be "other." These theoretical underpinnings, however, tend to rest exclusively upon inter-personal experiences of creating and maintaining a particular social identity throughout the aging process. Below, we elaborate upon Putney's work by shifting our attention towards ways that broader social contexts, including policies, practices, and ethical considerations, may further

influence older adults' relationships with their pets, as well as their experiences of aging. We draw upon current understandings of relational public health ethics frameworks (Baylis, Kenny, & Sherwin, 2008) and of relational coordination theory (Gittell, 2011) as we consider relational ecologies, pets and aging-in-place.

Methods

This study represents one component of a multiple case study (Yin, 2009) designed to understand ways that human-companion animal relationships shape experiences of aging-in-place in a Canadian city known for having progressive policies around pet-ownership (Rock, 2013). In this article, we focus specifically upon the perspectives of community agencies whose staff and volunteers bear witness to a range of situations that involve older adults and their pets. This is an important source of knowledge that is underrepresented within the study of pets and aging. Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary.

Case Selection

Our location lends itself to a case study on aging-in-place with pets for several reasons. First, Calgary is recognized across Canada and beyond as a 'pet-friendly' city, based in part on the City's policies on responsible pet-ownership (Rock, 2013). Additionally, Calgary is in the process of implementing a municipal age-friendly strategy (City of Calgary Community & Neighbourhood Services, 2015). Thus, there is a current policy interest in planning and evaluating efforts to respond to the needs of the aging population. While pet ownership is not specifically mentioned, the municipal strategy emphasizes social inclusivity for all older adults, and also attends to the specific needs of older adults living in vulnerable circumstances, including lower household income and social isolation.

Sampling Strategy and Description

Our sampling strategy was purposive. We recruited participants based on our interest in elaborating upon Putney's (2013) relational ecology framework for understanding human-animal relationships, specifically by considering the policy and practice contexts in which aging-in-place is experienced. As such, we gathered contextual information from several sources (Yin, 2009).

Interviews. Our main sample comprised 14 semi-structured interviews: 6 participants representing four local community agencies that support vulnerable older adults; 5 participants representing three local animal welfare organizations; 2 family physicians whose practices include older adults; and 1 senior policy analyst who had been involved in a review of subsidized seniors' housing pet policies in another Canadian setting. Both paid employees and volunteers were included in our sample, representing both front-line service delivery and administration. Specific participants were identified at the discretion of each organization's senior administration. The majority of participants (10 of 14) were women, and a majority (9 of 14) had their own companion animals at the time of the interview. For the analysis that follows, we focused specifically on our subset of 11 interviews with representatives of community-based social service (SS) and animal welfare (AW) agencies, as described in Table 1. The additional interviews with physicians and the policy analyst served to inform our interpretations of our primary interviews, but are not referenced directly in our findings.

We obtained informed consent from each participant. Interviews were semi-structured and were conducted using an interview guide designed to establish rapport and to draw out insights and experiences relating to companion animals and aging-in-place in our local context. While examples of general interview questions are listed in Table 2, each specific interview guide was tailored to reflect the participating organization's mandate, and was also shaped by *a priori* knowledge of the participating individual's position within that organization. The interview guide was adapted iteratively as data collection proceeded, and as specific themes and issues began to emerge.

Table 1. Description of participants interviewed as part of a case study exploring opportunities and benefits of companion animals for older adults who are aging-in-place in an urban Canadian setting

<i>Description of Represented Organization</i>	<i>ID/Description of Position</i>	<i>Has Pet</i>
Social support agency (not-for-profit organization)—social support, older adult-specific	SS1/ employee, front line*	No
Social support agency (not-for-profit agency)— social support, vulnerable older adult-specific	SS2/ employee, administration SS3/ employee, front line	Yes No
Social support agency (charitable, non-profit organization)—material support, lower income-specific	SS4/ employee, administration	No
Social support agency (not-for-profit organization)—material support, older adults and other vulnerable populations	SS5/ employee, administration SS6/ volunteer, front line	No Yes
Animal welfare agency (regulating body)—impounding, shelter, adoption, spay/neuter (dogs and cats)	AW1/ employee, front line AW2/ employee, front line and administration	Yes Yes
Animal welfare agency (registered charity and humane society)—rescue, shelter, adoption, spay/neuter services (cats)	AW3/ volunteer, front line and administration AW4/ employee, front line	Yes Yes
Animal welfare agency (non-profit charitable organization)—rescue, adoption (cats)	AW5/ volunteer, front line and administration	Yes

*NOTE: SS1 requested that the interview not be audio-recorded. The first author took detailed fieldnotes and shared these with the participant within 24 hours of the interview. The participant verified the accuracy of the written record.

Table 2: Sample interview questions used to facilitate semi-structured interviews with research participants

General topics covered*

Description of daily activities as employee/volunteer for organization, and contextualization of activities within broader mandate of organization

Description of target population for services

Discussion of impact of aging population on current service provision

Reflections on situations that have arisen, that have involved pets and older adults

Regularity with which situations involving pets arise, and descriptions of such situations

Descriptions of any formal training received around pets (for human social support agencies) and communication with older adults (for animal welfare agencies)

Discussion of any formal organizational policies or practices relevant to pets and aging-in-place

Identification of any formal organizational partnerships between human social support and animal welfare agencies

Reflections on services and supports that would assist older adults with having pets

General views on roles of companion animals in older adults' lives, including both benefits and challenges

Perspectives on approaches for addressing situations where interventions are needed, for safety of older adults and/or companion animals

Personal experiences with pets

*NOTE: Each specific interview guide was tailored to reflect the participating organization's mandate, and was also shaped by *a priori* knowledge of the participating individual's position within that organization. Questions were adapted iteratively as specific themes and issues began to emerge.

Table 3: Sample questions used to facilitate meetings with housing providers

*General topics covered**

Description of target population for housing and housing application process
Discussion of both past and current pet-related rental policy, including rationale
Reflections on demand for pet-friendly (subsidized) housing
Descriptions of situations that staff have experienced, involving pets and older adults
Regularity with which situations involving pets arise, and descriptions of such situations
Identification of any formal organizational partnerships between housing providers and animal welfare agencies
Reflections on services and supports that would assist older adults with having pets
General views on roles of companion animals in older adults' lives, including both benefits and challenges

*NOTE: Meeting guides were tailored for each housing provider.

The first author conducted all interviews between November 2014 and June 2015. Most interviews took place in-person and on-site at participating organizations' facilities. One interview was conducted by telephone (AW5), and one took place at a local café (SS4). All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed, with the exception of SS1, who did not wish to be audio-recorded. For this exception, extensive fieldnotes were taken, and SS1 reviewed and approved the written record within 24 hours. Interviews were on average an hour in length, ranging from 40 to 90 minutes.

Meetings. As our study progressed, we became aware of repeated concerns around the lack of affordable pet-friendly housing in our city, both within the subsidized housing supply and in the private market. As a result, the first author initiated two additional meetings with local organizations that provide subsidized housing to lower income older adults. One of these organizations serves older adults with underlying mental health concerns, and was in the process of revoking its pet-tolerant tenancy practices. The second organization provides one of our

city's only pet-friendly subsidized residences for independent, lower income older adults, and allows tenants to have cats. To our knowledge, our city offers no comparable subsidized housing options that allow dogs of any size or breed.

Both meetings were attended by multiple employees, each of whom provided informed consent. The first meeting occurred in October 2015; the second in May 2016. We opted not to audio-record these conversations. Instead, the first author took extensive fieldnotes. Informal meeting guides were crafted for each meeting, to ensure that discussions remained focused and relevant (see Table 3 for sample questions). Participants were provided with an electronic copy of the final documentation within 24-48 hours, and were invited to review and revise the written record. The perspectives shared during these meetings alerted us to practical complexities of providing affordable rental housing that allows pets, which we recognize must be considered in relation to the perceived shortage of such housing supply.

Companion animals and aging research symposium. In addition to our interviews and meetings, the first author organized a research symposium on companion animals and aging, which took place under the umbrella of a national gerontology conference held in October 2015, in the city where our research took place. The symposium brought together both academic scholars and representatives of animal welfare agencies in order to discuss emerging practical issues and scholarly research related to pets and the aging population (Canadian Association on Gerontology, 2015). The content presented, together with the discussion that ensued, evolved our understanding of aging-in-place with pets, within our local context and also within the broader Canadian setting.

Data analysis

Digital audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcription was shared by the first author and a professional hired to assist with this project. The first author reviewed all transcripts for accuracy and corrected errors and omissions. During this process, the first author also wrote extensive research memos to capture post-hoc reactions and reflections, drawing iterative comparisons both within each interview and

between interviews, while also maintaining reflexivity and self-awareness. Data were reviewed multiple times by the first author, who led the inductive thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining first-level coding of manifest themes with a process of immersion and crystallization (Borkan, 1999) that led to identifying latent themes. At this point, all authors reviewed a sample of transcripts and discussed proposed themes, which were then refined. The first author continued coding the data set in its entirety and refining themes based on iterative and evolving understandings of the data. All authors met to discuss transcript content and theme derivation, and utilized e-mail correspondence to remain in communication until consensus was achieved. QSR-NVivo10 was used to manage the data analysis.

Findings

We designed our interviews to explore participants' perspectives on ways that relationships with pets contributed to their clients' experiences of aging-in-place, and also on the ways that clients' pets impacted their own efforts to assist older adults. Accordingly, the themes discussed below are organized within these two overarching categories.

Pets and older adults' experiences of aging-in-place

In reflecting upon their clients' relationships with pets, all of our participants remarked on ways that having pets seemed to help older adults to situate themselves socially. At the same time, participants also observed situations where pets became conduits through which older adults experienced socially-patterned barriers that constrained their autonomy as individual citizens. Both of these perceptions are explored below.

Social situatedness. Throughout the entirety of our interviews, we were repeatedly struck by ways that pets were viewed as enabling older adults to feel both purposeful and intrinsically valued. For many older adults, having a pet also meant participating in a valued cultural practice that could transcend the bounds of age and isolation. This view was aptly expressed by a long-time volunteer involved in front line work serving lower

income and isolated older adults, " ... 'cause a lot of these seniors, they're living by themselves, they have all these issues and it's almost like they become the center of the universe. Whereas to me, I like to put it, if you're a pet owner you become part of the universe" [SS6].

Several participants also reflected on the sense of purpose that pets provided for older adults who were aging-in-place, and especially for those living in lower income situations and having weak social networks. This sense of the connection between having a pet and having a valued position in society was reflected in the view of a front-line employee with an animal welfare organization:

This animal is *so important* to them because it is what keeps them going ... fine, they don't have a lot of money. But they're doing the best for this animal that they can do with the money that they have. And they will subsidize (sic) their own food to be able to feed this animal the best that they can, and take care of it the best that they can. And if that's what they need to make them happy, and feel like a person in society that really means something, then go for it... because now they can give to something else that's a living, breathing creature that they have to look after. [AW2]

Similarly, an employee with an agency that serves our city's most socially isolated, low income older adults discussed that for those clients who have pets, their relationships are "... a life-line. That is, time and time again, 'Without this animal? There's no reason for me to wake up in the morning.'" [SS2]

Constrained autonomy. Participants were acutely aware of the challenges many older adults must negotiate as their living circumstances change. While some participants discussed these challenges in relation to diminishing capacities, most often they were framed in relation to housing arrangements. Often clients were put in the position of having to choose between housing and their pet, which had negative consequences for their quality of life and well-being. As described by a front-line employee with an agency that assists vulnerable older adults:

... in this city, not a lot of seniors housing bodies accept pets. Very, very few do, and so then the senior is faced with the

difficulty of 'Well, do I accept housing and get rid of my pet, or do I stay where I am?' Maybe it's not a good environment for them, or they could end up homeless, potentially. It becomes that difficult decision of 'What do I do? Do I get rid of my pet or do I stay in, maybe, a not-so-good situation for myself?' [SS3]

Participants often referred to a general, societal-level expectation that older adults will obligingly give up their pets as long as there is someone within their social network—a family member or a close friend—who will take the animal. Yet a front-line employee who helps older adults to locate and apply for affordable housing reflected that "Regardless of whether they do or do not (have social ties), no one wants to part with their pet." [SS1 (excerpt from fieldnotes)]

Several participants commented on how often they heard older adults express a genuine longing for a companion animal. In describing intake conversations with new clients, one senior administrator with an agency that delivers in-home support mentioned:

'Cause we ask, regardless of where they live, do you have a dog that we need to know about? 'Oh I wish I could have a dog, oh I wish!' 'I had to give up my dog when I moved in here'. Those kinds of things? So, we do hear that. [SS5]

The shortage of affordable pet-friendly housing for older adults was also discussed by participants from animal welfare agencies. One participant reflected on the increasing frequency with which formerly-adopted animals were being returned to their agency due to older adults' housing transitions:

"I would say at least 4 or 5 (cats) have come back (recently) because they've had to move into other accommodations that just don't allow pets. I think that's really sad because they're really devastated, and the cat's devastated, too." [AW4]

Participants also noted the negative consequences of financial hardship on older adults and their pets. As one front-line service provider described:

"... there are times when a senior is facing financial difficulties and then the conversation comes up about the pet and

how much the pet is costing and whether or not that's feasible any longer ... (It) comes down to who can afford what. And those who can afford it do better in general, and those who can't always end up suffering and going without." [SS3]

Pets and organized efforts to promote aging-in-place

Because of the pivotal roles pets played in the lives of many clients, our participants often viewed efforts directed towards pets as being integral to supporting people as well. Yet they also described ways that these efforts were discretionary, and at times confounded by limitations imposed by organizational mandates and priorities. Both of these scenarios are described below.

Acts of more-than-human solidarity. Many of our participants shared stories illustrating ways that actions directed at helping pets, versus people, were acts of solidarity that served the interests of both people and pets. As observed by the co-founder of a local animal welfare agency: "I'm helping the cats. Which, in turn, helps the people." [AW3] This sentiment was mirrored by a front-line service provider, reflecting on a situation she had recently encountered:

... the senior, he was very attached to his dog. It had been with him for, I think it was something like 13 years, so he had aged along with the dog. And, you don't want to be the one to really kind of tear that relationship apart. So, what we do often is try and kind of get to the root of why is the senior not managing? Hopefully if we can help them manage better, then in turn they'll be managing the care of the pet better. [SS3]

This same participant described efforts she had made to investigate formal service animal certification programs after a client, who depended on her dog for mental health support (as confirmed by a letter from her psychiatrist), was turned down by a housing provider. This form of assistance extended well beyond the scope of this participant's professional duties, and illustrates the discretionary capacity that front-line service staff may have to act upon their sense of the importance of human-animal relationships in their clients' lives.

Organizational-level solidarity for both people and their pets was less common and was also complex. For instance, an administrative employee with an agency that addresses food insecurity noted that older adults' requests for food assistance had doubled over recent years compared to the broader population. He recounted that:

We know that they are in crisis or they're on a low income ... If a person is asking for a couple of extra cans of tuna, and with an extra couple of questions, they respond that "Well, this is for my pet, or cat, or whoever," this just reminds us (to mention) tha ... besides human, we have pet food ... and we type down (this information) in the hamper request. So volunteers won't miss it. [SS4]

While this specific agency embraces the philosophy that supporting people through times of crisis must include supporting their pets, the agency's guiding organizational mandate forbids direct purchase of pet food and supplies using operational monies and donated funds. Therefore, the agency may only redistribute pet-related items that are received in the form of in-kind donations from individuals and industry. Thus even as a defining philosophy, the more-than-human solidarity enacted by this organization has been shaped at the discretion of its current administrative management.

Paradoxes in practice. Participants often shared challenges they faced when responding to situations involving older adults and pets. At times, these situations interfered with, or even disrupted altogether, their efforts to assist older adults. One participant framed the pet-related obstacles she faced in terms of broader social values: "I find that a lot of agencies that provide emergency financial support in one way or another don't consider pet supplies or pet costs as a need." [SS3] Most commonly, however, participants described the shortage of affordable pet-friendly housing as the primary barrier to helping their clients. One front-line service provider observed:

... it doesn't balance out. I mean, you're wanting to help the senior and protect them and make sure that these individuals have a high quality of life, but at the same time you're taking away the thing that makes that happen. [SS2]

Reflecting upon older adults who refuse to part with pets to attain housing, another front-line service provider admitted that "they do fall off the radar. We just can't assist them. Their files usually end up getting closed" [SS3]. A similar sentiment was shared by a participant from a different agency, who was similarly tasked with helping older adults to locate affordable housing:

SS1 is very sensitive to the pet issue, as many of the seniors she assists are emotionally distressed by the prospect of losing their beloved pet, to the point of being in tears on the telephone. If she knows ahead of time that she will be assisting a senior who is trying to find housing that will allow a dog, she tries to call them prior to their appointment. Since many have to make an effort to get to her work site, she feels that they need to know that there are *no dog-friendly facilities* available within subsidized or not-for-profit housing, and that there is nothing that her organization can do about this situation. [excerpt from fieldnotes, emphasis added]

On the day of our interview alone, this participant had meetings scheduled with three separate older adults who were seeking housing with a pet.

Discussion

We set out to understand the implications of older adults' relationships with pets in the context of aging-in-place, conceived as both a policy focus and an individual preference. Our findings have reaffirmed Putney's (2013) relational ecology proposition that older adults may experience benefits in relation to pets and aging via maintaining self-identity and the capacity to cope with interdependencies and change. Our findings have also evolved current understandings by illustrating situations where broader policies and practices related to aging-in-place become integral components of the relational ecologies that shape human-animal relationships and aging.

Regarding the benefits of human-animal relationships for older adults themselves, our participants described ways that having a pet may generate and support in their clients a sense of being socially-situated. As a concept, 'situatedness' suggests that human existence is experienced and defined in relation

to environmental, social, and cultural factors (Costello, 2014). For older adults in particular, pets seem to offer a nexus where these different factors converge, establishing a firm social role that remains intact, even as other life circumstances shift and change. We surmise that to some degree, feeling socially-situated may arise directly from the companionship provided by a pet (Enders-Slegers, 2000; McNicholas, 2014; McNicholas et al., 2005; Putney, 2013). Beyond companionship, however, we suggest that feeling socially-situated may also be linked to the meaningful occupation of caring for a pet, as we consider all that is required in order to meet a companion animal's needs on a regular, daily basis (Putney, 2013; Raina et al., 1999; Zimolag & Krupa, 2009). Between the reciprocity of companionship and the responsibility of caring for a pet, older adults may derive both intrinsic fulfilment and extrinsic meaningfulness, thus situating the aging self as being both valued and capable. This effect may be especially salient to older adults living in socially isolated and low income circumstances (Anderson et al., 2015; Lago et al., 1983; McNicholas et al., 2005; Ormerod, 2012), for whom opportunities to reinforce a sense of social worth may be obstructed by inequitable social and material conditions (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009; Pavalko & Caputo, 2013).

Still, even as our findings have reaffirmed ways that older adults may benefit from relationships with pets, they extend the relational ecology framework by illustrating how older adults, especially those living in vulnerable circumstances, may also face inordinate barriers to having pets as they age-in-place. The barriers that our participants described in relation to their clients were often contingent upon having low income and weak social networks. The challenges these older adults faced around having pets illustrated the extent to which individual autonomy is experienced in relation to oppressive social structures, and ways that social conditions shape the choices available to older adults living in, or transitioning into, lower income situations (Baylis et al., 2008).

Affordable housing that is also pet-friendly is virtually non-existent in our city. Consequently, discriminatory housing rules were mentioned repeatedly as a primary reason why older adults and (often longtime) companion animals were forcibly separated; why agencies were at times unable to effectively

assist clients in need of support; and also why new relationships with pets could not be forged by older adults, even when desired. The uncertainty that many lower income clients faced as they searched for housing situations where they could remain with their pets also resulted in significant emotional anguish (Stoewen, 2012). These troubling situations point towards the need for us as a society to rethink ways that ethical principles shape the contexts we have created to support aging-in-place. It is important that we begin to formally recognize the implications that human-animal relationships have in relation to the aging experiences of older adults themselves, as reinforced by our relational ecology perspective.

A novel contribution of our study has been to shed light on tangible ways that human-animal relationships can affect, both negatively and positively, efforts to enable aging-in-place. Our participants were purposively selected for their direct and practical experiences with this endeavour. Not once did we hear that companion animal relationships “should” be dispensed with in order to meet conventionally-recognized aging-in-place needs and priorities. In some cases, we learned that discretionary efforts directed towards pets themselves had meaningful, positive impact on older adults’ lives. We understood these perspectives as aligning with Rock and Degeling’s (2015) conception of more-than-human solidarity. Rock and Degeling expand upon Prainsack and Buyx’s (2012, p. 346) conception of solidarity as both interpersonal- and collective-level “manifestations of the willingness to carry costs to assist others” for particular situations when “cared-for others include non-human animals, plants, or places” (Rock & Degeling, 2015, p. 62). Still, we also learned of instances where pet-related issues created paradoxical situations that inhibited agencies’ capacities to appropriately and effectively serve their clients. In particular, our participants noted the regularity with which files were closed or clients were turned away altogether if they were unwilling to part with their pet in order to find suitable and affordable housing.

We realize that challenges may arise when it comes to including pets within the ‘places’ where people are meant to age-in-place. For instance, our informational meetings with subsidized housing providers alerted us to distressing situations, like animal abuse and neglect, with which building managers

and other front-line workers were occasionally faced. These situations, however, appeared to be more prevalent among older adults living with mental illnesses, and were infrequently reported within the broader aging population, as others have also found (Huss, 2013; McNicholas, 2014). Importantly, older adults themselves, including those who do not have pets, may support the provision of pet-friendly subsidized housing, as long as responsible pet ownership is practiced by those residents who have pets (Freeze, 2010; Mahalski et al., 1988).

Overall, our findings underscore a pervasively institutionalized view that pets are dispensable in the context of aging-in-place. This view is manifest in both policy-level factors and organizational practices, even as individual actions taking place within these structures may suggest an opposing sentiment. Even so, it became apparent to us that perspectives of both human social services and animal welfare agencies contained continuities that crossed species lines, in terms of recognizing the extent to which the well-being of older adults and their pets may be intertwined and indivisible. This recognition points towards opportunities for social support services and animal welfare agencies to formally coordinate their efforts to support, in tandem, both human and non-human animal interests.

While relational coordination often refers to operations within a single organization (Gittell, 2011), we propose that relational coordination networks may extend *across* organizations, so as to also cross species boundaries. An example of this type of initiative has recently been launched in our own local context. “Pet Assist” (Calgary Seniors Resource Society, 2017) is being piloted by the Calgary Seniors Resource Society (CSRS), a community agency that provides supportive services to lower income and socially-isolated older adults. To deliver this program, CSRS has forged partnerships with a mobile veterinary clinic, a charity that provides financial assistance for pet care, and several local animal welfare agencies. Supported by this platform of inter-agency collaboration, CSRS recruits and trains volunteers in order to assist vulnerable clients with their pet care needs, including weight management, monitoring medication, and providing support during and following veterinary visits. This model program illustrates how closer collaborations

between two traditionally distinct types of community agencies can leverage the values that underscore more-than-human solidarity (Rock & Degeling, 2015) within the broader social and policy contexts of promoting aging-in-place. This approach also aligns with cross-sectoral approaches to promoting aging-in-place (Steels, 2015). Ideally, initiatives like Pet Assist will also underscore efforts to advocate for increasing the availability of pet-friendly affordable housing, by preventing untenable situations from arising in the first place, and by offering a coordinated solution that can address both older adults' and pets' needs, should concerns arise.

Limitations

The complexity of aging-in-place as both an individual experience and a population-level phenomenon suggests the involvement of multifaceted stakeholders, ranging from policy-makers to service-providers to older adults themselves. In approaching this component of our case study, we limited the scope of our sampling to community agencies that serve older adults, and to animal welfare agencies whose operations may be affected by population aging. Our scope also limited our study's ability to capture the entire breadth of valuable perspectives on aging-in-place and pets. For example, the perspectives of homecare providers and community nurses, whose clients and patients may be experiencing multiple transitions in terms of health and ability, would offer invaluable insight. Veterinary professionals' views must also be considered in relation to the mounting challenges older adults may face to care for an animal as they age. The perspectives of older adults themselves, on the lived experiences of aging-in-place with pets, must also be considered. As with all case studies, our study reflects aging-in-place with pets in our own local context. Even so, our findings may be meaningful across a range of settings, given that both population aging and the popularity of pets are global phenomena; that promoting aging-in-place is an internationally-sanctioned effort; and that the availability of affordable, appropriate housing is fundamental to promoting aging-in-place.

Conclusion

We can anticipate that for a substantial proportion of older adults, aging-in-place will involve a pet. Ideally, these important relationships will support aging-in-place by contributing to maintained independence and by reaffirming a sense of social inclusion. Yet, especially for older adults who experience reduced incomes and increased social isolation, these advantages may be offset by social conditions that make having a pet difficult or even impossible. To redress this situation, our society must start to formally recognize both the existence *and the importance* of older adults' relationships with pets. Considering these relationships through an extended relational ecology theoretical framework (Putney, 2013) has enabled us to understand ways that existing social structures and approaches to promoting aging-in-place may both constrain and enable positive relationships between older adults and pets. We thus encourage community-based social services and animal welfare agencies to forge relational networks that cross both organizational and species lines. But first and foremost, we need to adopt a policy structure that will improve the availability of affordable, pet-friendly housing options for older adults. Without enough 'places' where older adults can age with their pets, we will continue to be hindered in our efforts to promote aging-in-place in ways that are equitable and inclusive – for older adults, and for their pets.

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